

Remarks
Ambassador D. Brent Hardt
National Training Workshop on Implementation of Prevention
Strategies and Actions to Address Youth Gangs and Violence
Tuesday, February 5, 2013, 09:00am
Grand Coastal Hotel, East Coast Demerara

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Friends All

On behalf of the United States Embassy, thank you for the invitation to be a part of this National Training Workshop on the implementation of prevention strategies to address youth gangs and violence. This workshop continues a timely and strategic CARICOM intervention in Guyana and other Caribbean countries to tackle head on the emergence of youth gangs and related violence. I am confident that the ideas presented and the open exchange of views will lead to even more effective project implementation and targeted strategies to combat the scourge of youth gangs and the violence that surrounds them.

The United States shares CARICOM's belief that it is vital to the region's future to ensure a better future for young people -- to overcome the lack of opportunity, social isolation, and culture of violence that have placed so many "at

risk." When we first began to develop the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) partnership, we heard from leaders throughout the Caribbean that they worried about youth and were uncertain how to counter the slide into violent behavior. I recall in my first meeting with Secretary General LaRocque when he emphasized his concern that the region risked losing a generation if more was not done to guide young people to become positive and contributing members of society.

If we are to achieve this goal, we have to grapple with a number of manifestations of the risks facing Caribbean youth, including lack of economic opportunity, job skills, and life skills, the interaction between young people and the judicial system, and the reality of life on the streets and in villages. And it is here, in dealing with the daily social pressures, temptations, and criminal environment that the CARICOM project is so critical. By identifying the risk and protective factors of at-risk youth within the Caribbean, as this project has done through community mapping, successful programs can be built that can contribute to national and regional strategies to address the root causes of youth gangs and violence. The programs you will discuss and refine in the coming days will help advance this effort by identifying the actions whose implementation will equip youth with the ability to steer clear of gangs and choose paths as healthy, productive members of Guyana's communities. This effort to counter gangs -- to

nip this threat in the bud -- is one critical element of a comprehensive strategy to reverse the tide of youth violence.

To help address some of the other key youth risk factors, the CBSI partnership has sought to develop initiatives and undertake actions in complementary areas. While the CBSI partnership between the United States and the Caribbean seeks to reduce illicit trafficking, increase public safety and security, and promote social justice, it is this last pillar that has generated some of the best and most innovative CBSI collaboration.

Here in Guyana our USAID Skills and Knowledge for Youth Employment (SKYE) project has been working with an array of local partners to reduce youth violence by strengthening youth participation in economic activity and increasing their engagement in society. Already through the SKYE project, 122 at-risk youth have graduated from a work readiness curriculum and have been linked with mentors to guide them on a path to employment and opportunity. In this effort, the private sector has been an enthusiastic partner in helping identify where jobs can be found and being willing to take a chance on a SKYE graduate.

Recognizing that one of the most effective approaches to reducing youth crime and violence is to concentrate on rehabilitation and second chance opportunities for troubled youth who may already have had a brush with the law, SKYE has also been working with young offenders and the courts to promote

alternative sentencing programs and to facilitate successful reintegration. Again, we have already seen dozens of cases where young Guyanese have been able to take advantage of SKYE's alternatives rather than be sentenced to terms in prison, where they may have become more hardened in their outlook. We are pleased that these initiatives are taking root and making a difference in the lives of Guyana's young people.

Once again, I commend CARICOM for its determination to take on the challenge of gangs and youth violence, and for bringing together all the key partners, such as teachers, parents, faith-based organizations and community leaders. It will take a persistent, coordinated effort among all stakeholders -- local, national, and international -- to tackle all of the risks facing the region's youth. By working together, we can implement and strengthen programs to prevent young people from turning to illegal activities and violence. At the last CBSI dialogue meeting, we spoke of exploring ways we can deepen this collaboration going forward, and that is certainly something that the United States looks forward to discussing. Again, thank you for the opportunity to be part of this workshop. I am confident that your deliberations will lead to new ideas and renewed commitment to action to prevent gang violence and finding positive alternatives for the young people of Guyana.